Note by LMB: This was my acceptance speech for the Mythopoeic Award for Adult Literature given to my fantasy novel *The Curse of Chalion* by the Mythopoeic Society, of which there is more information at: http://www.mythsoc.org/

"The **Mythopoeic Society** is a non-profit organization promoting the study, discussion, and enjoyment of fantastic and mythic literature through books and periodicals, annual conferences, discussion groups, awards, and more.

We are especially interested in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams, prominent members of the informal Oxford literary circle known as the "Inklings" (1930s-1950s)."

Speech given August 6, 2006 at Mythcon 37, University of Oklahoma,

Norman, OK.

How I Met the Inklings

I will preface these remarks by pointing out the obvious, or what will shortly become obvious: I am not an Inklings scholar, and my knowledge of these writers as persons consists of the most random smatterings picked up along the way. I do mean to get around to reading more of their literary biographies one of these days.

Nevertheless, as I have become a writer myself, I have grown more and more aware that the trope of the writer as lone genius is a myth proffered by non-writers who really don't understand how this stuff works. Every writer of note, when I've scratched the surface, turns out to come from a lively context of other writers, correspondents, editors, critics, and literate and argumentative friends and colleagues. This observation has given me my personal definition of a genre–"Any group of works in close conversation with each other." As readers, we tend to encounter only the polished result of that uproar, as the book alone appears in our hand and the context drops away. I'm not sure this is a bad thing–like law and sausages, it may sometimes be better not to watch how novels are made. But the reading context matters, as the ground changes the figure.

As a naive young reader I was quite unaware of all this. Books came out of the walls, as far as I could tell. Oh, sure, sometimes there would be an "about the author" paragraph in the back of a book, but there were no photos in those days and I skipped that bit as often as not. The idea of actually meeting a real writer, at least a real writer of

anything I liked to read, never even crossed my mind. Writers were more remote than the far side of the moon, with which I was at least familiar from my early science fiction reading. (I note in passing, since I'm in a reminiscent mood, that when I was a girl no human living or in all of prior history knew what might be on the far side of the moon; it had not yet been photographed or seen. That metaphor used to have more impact.) Nowadays my personal world is hip-deep in writers, as well as editors, publishers, and readers, but in those days reading was a lonely, or more correctly, a solitary pursuit, since I was never lonely when I had a book.

As a young girl growing up in semi-rural Ohio, my first love was horses and my first reading love was horse stories. My reading level took an abrupt jump in 3rd grade when I discovered, quite by accident, that during the weekly library period I didn't need to select *only* from the age-appropriate books laid out on the long table in our combination library-cafeteria; I could take any book on the shelves. I fell on Marguerite Henry and Walter Farley and wolfed them down, with a side helping of Eleanor Cameron (*Visit to the Mushroom Planet* and sequels) and anything else that caught my eye. I added more science fiction as my pre-adolescent world widened, since my father read it and therefore a smattering of paperbacks and magazines lay around the house. Mine was not one of those childhoods with easy reach by foot or bicycle to a corner store or library. We lived out in the country a ten or twelve mile car ride from such amenities, and I had no allowance nor anywhere to spend it if I did. But library books were free and my mother had to drive in for groceries anyway, so I did get to the libraries. (She was far less warm to paperbacks, which cost or in her view wasted money–at least the sort of titles I wanted to buy did–and had no truck at all with comics, so I missed all that.) But I learned to look for the rocket ship on the spine in the three public libraries I could occasionally access, as well as the one at my school.

So anyway, somewhere in that first rush of voracious reading when I was tearing through the SF and fantasy sections of all the libraries within striking distance–the sections were much smaller in those days, note–between Eric Frank Russell and Heinlein-Clarke-Asimov and early 1960's John W. Campbell, Jr. *Analog Magazine*, I came across–might have been one of my Dad's paperbacks–a most peculiar first-trip-to-Mars book by some British writer that was the strangest SF I'd read to date, even counting *Childhood's End*.

A little more context here: I had picked up and read my Dad's paperback of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* at about age 10, thinking it might be a horse story or at least a talking animal story. It was quite shattering to me. "They're taking him to the knackers!" *Aagh!* I cried. I am fairly sure that when Mr. Orwell wrote his book, making little American girls burst into tears was not among the literary effects he was envisioning, but then, very few writers I read during that era ever

seemed to have pictured me as one of their readers, not that I noticed them either. I read scads of British and other boys' adventure stories, including my brother's copies of *Boy's Life*, without once observing that they were not addressed to me. But anyway, reading *Animal Farm* made me wary of British writers in much the same way as stepping on a bee made me wary of running barefoot through clover-studded lawns.

So here was this peculiar trip-to-Mars book, which spent a long time on this rather dismal fellow named Ransom who tried to sabotage the heroes' efforts and betray them to these incomprehensible aliens–the heroes were clearly the guys building the rocket, of course–and from there it got stranger. Apparently one of those weird depressing British books again... It fell into the compost of my omnivorous reading along with the rest, and I gave it little further thought; Lewis's religious subtext wooshed as far over my head at age 13 as Orwell's political subtext had at age 10.

Fast forward to 1965, and the Great Family Trip to Europe, back when that was still thought of as a once-in-a-lifetime experience and not a commute. Just exactly how I at age 15 wrested permission to spend a preliminary three weeks hitch-hiking with my 21-year-old brother through England, going the Youth Hostels route on five dollars a day, I do not now recall, although I suspect my mother was permanently traumatized. But one of my shining memories was from our very first few days. We'd had a night of almost no sleep in Oxford on a college park bench beside a little stream, because we'd arrived in town after the local youth hostel had closed; happily, a local bobby boosted us over the wall, because he couldn't find the student who had the duplicate key to the gate. I had then almost no idea what Oxford was, either, but I can say I've slept there. Anyway, next day we stumbled into Stratford-upon-Avon and I saw my first production of *Love's Labor's Lost*, by the real Royal Shakespeare Company. My brother was inclined to doze off in his seat, but I was enthralled beyond measure: clearly, not all British writers were dismal.

Later in the trip we met up with my parents in Paris, and my brother dumped me off on them in some relief and went north by thumb to visit Finnish girls, while we went south by rented car. In a bookstore in Rome near one of the famous fountains, I stumbled upon a shelf of used books in English. The only even vaguely fantasy-sfnal-looking thing there was this orange paperback with a picture of a wizard-and-staff on the cover, so I picked it up. It was a strange book, but I plowed through happily enough, finishing it on the plane back from Paris to Boston. The ending was a huge disappointment, however; it just sort of trailed off. Oh, lord, I thought, it's one of those darn dismal British writers, again...

What I had found, of course, was one of the Ace pirated editions of *Fellowship of the Ring*, which (if I recall correctly, which I may not)

had nothing on it about being part one of anything. (*) I kept that edition for a long time, and I deeply regret letting it go in one of my more wrong-headed housecleaning spurts about twenty years back. Half a year later, it was with overwhelming joy, still remembered vividly, that I found its two sequels–in the Ballantine "psychedelic cover" paperback edition on a wire rack in the middle of a drugstore in the inner corner of Kingsdale Shopping Center in Upper Arlington, to be precise. I could likely locate the spot by GPS, still. I don't remember the names of most of my high school teachers, mind you, but I remember that moment. (Although I forget how it was I had or begged the money to buy them.) "Aragorn sped on up the hill." November of ‘65. Bouncing into the big leatherette chair in my Dad's upstairs study beneath the west window, with the winter sun going down in the woods, turning pages madly. The world righted itself that afternoon.

A few years later a friend gave me a hardcover edition of the trilogy that I still have, and still re-read. At some phases of my life Tolkien, like Georgette Heyer, has fallen out of favor in my mood, usually as a result of listening too seriously to certain sorts of political-social-class polemics. But I keep growing back into them as I age, not so much taking them on their own terms but because my own terms widen and deepen, and they wait for me.

Speaking of which, back to Lewis. In my 20's, I finally got up to speed on my Christian theology, partly as a result of reading *The Screwtape Letters* and others of Lewis's essays, and from there I routed back into his science fiction trilogy. I was about three chapters into *Out of the Silent Planet*, at about age, oh, 28, when it began to creep over me that I'd read this book before... only it wasn't quite **this** book. The entire book-of-my-memory flipped over in my head, an astonishing reading experience, and slotted into its more author-intended context. I quite cherish that dual view. I'm still not sure the first version wasn't more interesting, in its own unique way...

Bringing up the tail, Charles Williams has been a late and incomplete acquisition for me. My friend Pat Wrede is the purveyor of most of my borrowed books, a practicing Catholic, and quite fond of Williams. So far, I've read the one with the moving sort-of chess set, and the one where the heroine dies on the first page, both of which titles escape me. But if I wave my hand and point, someone in this audience will supply them from those four-word descriptions–there. [Titles supplied by the audience as suspected.] Of them all, Williams might come the closest to actually deserving the label "one of those strange dismal British writers," except that he isn't really dismal, merely very strange and very British. Or I may re-read his books a decade from now and have them turn handsprings in my head, who knows? At the time perhaps the most putatively contemporary of the three writers, the "realistic" aspects of his works that might–this is a

very tentative guess–have made them more accessible to his peers have aged into rather alien period pieces, historical curiosities. It's his weird that remains fresh.

Some years ago I wrote an essay titled "The Unsung Collaborator," in which, I was later informed, I re-invented reader-response theory. (It's collected in the NESFA compendium *Dreamweaver's Dilemma*.) Some of the same ideas appear in "When World Views Collide," which is up on my website, somewhere. http://www.dendarii.com/collide.html

But the theory, that every reader's context changes the experience of every text, seems so transparently true to the way I read–and mis-read–I can't think why it wasn't invented long before.

This is part of the fascination of fanfic for me, by the way. Reading in slices down and across fandoms, with all the other variables held constant, you can actually **see** the way each reader-writer's head is processing the primary text differently, according to their measure. It's almost like being able to see inside readers' heads. And having watched the process of how different psychological concerns hijack the texts in the petri dishes of fanfic has also altered my awareness of how the exact same processes work, better disguised, in profic. More on this head at http://www.dendarii.com/fanfic.html

As a reader and a writer, I'm glad I met the Inklings, even or especially given the way my readings of them keep shifting around as new experiences pour into my head. Right now, I'm still waiting for the recent movies to wear off a bit. I have no doubt they will have permanently altered *The Lord of the Rings* for me, but then, so did my rather recent reading of *The Silmarillion*. Yet even after a lifetime of turns and twists, the best works have an integrity that keeps them righting themselves in my head; the conversation continues, always changing yet constantly renewed.

Thank you.

*–At the Conference, someone had put copies of all three volumes of the Ace version in the auction, and I happily bought them. So I have, if not the copy that went to Rome and back, at least a copy. As I remembered, there was nothing on the cover, spine, blurb, nor after the last page that indicated there was more. Buried at the end of the "about the author" paragraph was a brief reference to its being a heroic romance published in three parts, but no, like, *titles*, or *publication information* or anything of a sort. Argh!

Marketing was more primitive in those days, I suppose.